DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 551 CG 028 893

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TITLE Ethical Decision Making in Graduate-Level Counselor Education: Teaching Strategies and the Use of Professional Counselor Panels.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Counselor Training; Counselors; Educational Strategies; *Ethics; Graduate Students; Higher Education; Professional Development

ABSTRACT

Ethics education is an important area for counselors-in-training as well as practicing counselors. Particularly difficult for counselor trainees are the gray areas of ethics where the relationships between ethics, the law, and the counseling process are not clear. Practicing counselors may feel isolated when they need a reality check or immediate feedback regarding an ethics issue. Some ethics violations are easily recognizable whereas others are more subtle or may be clouded by the emotions of the counselor or client. Ongoing training in ethics is required in some locations for recertification. A panel format is described with the sharing of professional attitudes at its center. The use of ethics panels with experienced counselors who work in various settings provides new and experienced counselors with an opportunity to examine ethical decision-making processes of other practitioners. Gray areas of ethical concern are more evident in interactive panel formats. Addressing ethical issues from the multi-disciplinary perspectives of several practitioners provides counselors with a rich training experience. Contains 14 references. (Author/EMK)

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Running Head: INTERACTIVE ETHICS

Ethical Decision Making in Graduate-Level Counselor Education: Teaching Strategies and the Use of Professional Counselor Panels

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Abstract

Ethics education is an important area for counselors-in-training as well as for practicing counselors (Corey, Corey, & Callahan, 1993). The use of ethics panels with experienced counselors who work in various settings provide counselors with an opportunity to examine ethical decision-making processses of other practitioners. Grey areas of ethical concern are more evident in interactive panel formats. Addressing ethical issues form the multi-disciplinary perspective of several practitioners provides counselors with a rich training experience.

Ethical Decision Making in Graduate-Level Counselor Education: Teaching Strategies and the Use of Professional Counselor Panels

Recent emphasis on counseling-related ethics education has focused on legal issues, ethical standards, and decision-making processes (Corey, Corey, & Callahan, 1993; Swenson, 1993). Particularly difficult for counselor trainees are the grey areas of ethics such as areas where the relationships between ethics, the law and the counseling process are not clear. Critical issues related to virtues and ethics, that area that asks what is the right thing to do for the client, present the counselor with more decision-making difficulties than it would at first seem (Jordan & Mears, 1990). The determination of impending harm to others, assessing dangerousness to one's self, and what warrants further action on the counselor's part, in this post-Tarasoff era, have all become areas of major concern in ethics education and present a challenge for counselor educators who teach ethical issues and decision-making strategies.

How can we, as counselors, and as educators and trainers of counselors, learn about these complicated areas, particularly when ethical standards, the law, or employment policies within many counseling settings cannot provide the black and white kind of clarity for the necessary on-the-spot decision making that characterizes so much of our work? How do we learn to sort out and determine those factors that require action or more immediate decisions?

Professional counselor panels can provide a valuable resource for reflective learning when dealing with many practical issues or the numerous ethical dilemmas of counseling practice. Counselors, for example, practicing in rural areas (Forrester-Miller, 1997), or within a small school or agency, may feel isolated when they need a reality check or immediate feedback regarding an ethical issue. While they are no substitute for legal advice, professional panels can

provide behavioral modeling for the various styles of decision making, peer discussions, colleague interactions, tandem supervision and the many styles of multi-disciplinary viewpoints often involved when working with complicated ethical decisions (Croteau & Kusek, 1992).

The counseling field has become increasingly diversified in recent years (Corey, 1996). Panel members can be selected from these many areas of diversification. Ethics panels provide opportunities for interactive discussions for example, between any combination of school counselors, employee assistance counselors, clinical counselors, rehabilitation counselors or substance abuse counselors. This allows counselors from many areas of specialization to take part in a dynamic format of interactive learning.

Reading about ethics and interacting with other counselors about ethical issues are two separate kinds of learning experiences. Ethical complexities arise routinely in a counselor's career. Ethics panels address the importance of ethics education and its various components, such as principle ethics (Corey, et al., 1993), ethics and the law (Swenson, 1993), and virtues ethics (Jordan & Meara, 1990). Complex reasoning skills are required in the ethical decision-making process (Kitchener, 1984, 1986; Hill, Glasser, & Harden, 1995). If an ethical question or concern involves an ethical principle, a counselor usually can consult the codes or standards of professional practice. A counseling issue may involve an area of law, which may or may not be covered by any specific code or codes, or have any established legal precedent. In this case, it is wise for a practicing counselor to have access to consultative services of a legal professional through employment in a school, agency, or private practice. When a counselor asks the question, "what is the right thing to do for my client?" there is not often easy access to any written guidelines or systematic answers. A counselor has to consult his or her own conscience in a

reflective way, particularly if a consultant or supervisor is not available. A counselor's individual character, personal experiences, overall counseling knowledge, as well as the uniqueness of a situation, all come into play. Counselor educators and trainers of continuing education experiences for counselors, encounter a challenging aspect of the process of teaching ethical decision making as an overall skill, applicable to most counseling situations.

Some ethical violations are blatant or easily recognizable, whereby others are more subtle or may be clouded by the emotions of counselors or clients. Such subtle violations may be difficult to detect without adequate feedback from peers, supervisors, or from careful self evaluation. In a professional presentation format, panel members model the exploration of thoughts and feelings and acknowledge that all practitioners may make mistakes at times. A strong message that is consistent among panel members from varied areas of counseling specialization is that ethical awareness and decision making are unending processes that lead toward continued professional growth, efficacy and confidence.

Establishment of the Virtue Ethics Panel

Helping professionals have often chosen their work based on a sincere desire and commitment to be of service to clients (Kottler, 1993). They have not always been taught or thought of how they learned to make ethical decisions. Ethical decision making is a challenging area of counselor training and there is a need for more advanced types of training experiences available both during the graduate training process and during the years of professional practice. Legalities and accountability issues facing the counseling profession require that we be more knowledgeable when dealing with ethical concerns. Training in the area of ethics is often required in many states in order to maintain counselor licensure. For all of these reasons, the whole area of

ethics and ethical decision making require increasing and ongoing attention and exploration from counselors.

An informal needs assessment of local counselors (Katsekas & Lemay, 1993) led us to the process of creating a panel format in order to further explore the area of ethical decision making of practicing counselors. Our graduate student interns simultaneously requested wishing to hear from more local practitioners in a panel format concerning ethics in general as well as ethical decision-making processes. In discussions and planning processes, we further examined the idea of planning two panels, one for graduate students and another for our state clinical counseling association's yearly conference.

Speaker panel formats have been shown to be effective in other areas of counseling concern (Croteau & Kusek, 1992; Sutton, Bernard, Falvey, Hart, Katsekas, & Woodman, 1993). Panel formats permit, in a relatively short amount of time, a variety of perspectives, useful content, dynamic question and answer periods, and a variety of other meaningful interactions. Participants of counseling ethics panels often represent many years of professional counseling experience. Background can cover a wide range of issues, concerns and roles. In one of our structured training experiences, each panel member had served as statewide leaders in the counseling field or professional counseling organization at some point, in a specialty area such as counselor education, clinical counseling, school counseling, counselor supervision, multicultural counseling, counseling with children, substance abuse counseling or employee assistance work (Katsekas, LaBossiere, Lemay, & McKenney, 1993).

The Ethics Panel Format

A typical interactive panel format begins with each professional counselor describing his

or her professional career. In the introductory phase, panel members give examples of ethical decision making with well-disguised ethical dilemmas from their professional experiences. This generally takes a total time of a half hour to 45 minutes depending upon the number of panel members. Panel members, as well as audience participants, then have an opportunity to reflect upon or ask questions concerning any area of ethical decision making most relevant to them and recently encountered in their work settings. The whole area of ethical decision making is at once established as a phenomenological entity. The realm of decision-making in ethics through this process is explicitly related to one's attitudes, values (Corey, et al, 1993) and theoretical orientation. Comments and reactions are easily shared by members of the audience. Panel members elaborate on their initial discussions of how they have experienced an enhanced level of ethical awareness from the decisional dilemmas of their professional careers. Questions are presented to the panel members by the audience members with a moderator facilitating the interactions. Questions can vary from general issues, to cases, to opinions about trends in the field that deal with ethical concerns. The question and answer period lasts about an hour. A small group discussion period with each panel member could follow. Opportunities exist for networking with a refreshment period of time following the ethics panel activity. The total time for all of these activities does not generally exceed two hours. The authors have since utilized this format in a variety of settings.

Discussion

Many objectives are met within the ethics panel format. Ethical decision making as a separate area of counseling ethics is emphasized. Components of the ethical decision-making process becomes more clearly understood with live examples. With a focus on problem-solving

processes, situational dilemmas within clinical settings can be integrated and related to the theoretical, professional and behavioral aspects of counseling ethics.

Listening to various experiences of experienced professionals is a powerful format for learning about the decision-making process that allows for a deeper understanding of the need for a tolerance of ambiguity and counselor self awareness. Networking is a valuable professional activity, especially in the area of ethical decision making. We are convinced that with any three or four seasoned, professional counselors in this kind of a format, powerful dynamics and learning inevitably occur for audience members. Exemplary professional modeling occurs. Students and neophyte counselors gain confidence in processing their own ethical decision-making process with supportive, experienced professionals, and without the pressure of dealing with a client in an immediate, clinical situation or where they will be evaluated for their decision.

Rather than one right or wrong answer, ethical dilemmas more often than not elicit many probable, interactive type of answers offered within a variety of theoretical and practical situations. The panel audience is a powerful collective force for learning, with its unique elicitation of questions, reactions and opinions. In the panel format, ethical decision making becomes a more exciting area of inquiry. To the new counselor, a code of ethics may seem to be a dry document, but when mixed with professional experience and actual counseling situations, ethical standards become exciting forces of information and understanding. Actions speak louder than words. Ethical principles interfaced with actual counseling experience presents a dynamic arena for learning. Ethical decision making can be taught in a practical way by such a focusing on the intricacies of clinical practice, sharing of attitudes and interaction within the panel or with panel and audience. Experienced professionals also benefit from hearing concerns of new

counselors or counselors-in-training. This process challenges seasoned counselors to engage with more of the counseling literature, and to examine in more depth, how research relates to their current clinical practice.

Summary

Participants have reported that the ethics panels are positive learning experiences. During the question and answer period, issues may be discussed including concerns of ethics and group counseling, substance abuse counseling, working with children, and ethical issues involving colleagues. Most individuals report a greater sense of confidence and understanding when thinking what the more difficult ethical situations. There is a collective sense of lesser anxiety related to feeling alone in the struggles of complex ethical decision making.

The sharing of professional attitudes is the centerpiece of the ethics panel format. Counseling practitioners develop an ethical sense, partly from exposure to a variety of attitudes, counseling experiences and learning of a variety of decision-making styles. This is particularly the case for counselors-in-training or inexperienced counselors, who do not yet have an experiential base of practice upon which to build their ethical decision-making system. With exposure to different attitudes, counselors-in-training better understand the meaning of professional experience, and to better understand experiences, professional counselors need to share them. The panel format has shown that ethical concerns, formal counselor training and clinical experiences are inextricably connected. Ethical issues and concerns evolve most meaningfully out of the ongoing relationship that exists between counselor and client, and counselor and colleague. A more practical understanding and integration of ethics from the perspective of day-to-day contact with clients and different colleagues, needs more emphasis in our educational processes. An

established theoretical perspective or philosophical framework for understanding counseling ethics is enhanced by an interactive perspective.

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